

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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UNITED WAY LAUNCHES BACKPACK PROGRAM

Abingdon, VA (August 10, 2011) - Today, United Way of Russell and Washington Counties, in conjunction with the Washington and Russell County School Systems announced the launch of their new *"Backpacks Unite Program"* as part of the organizations *United for a Healthier Tomorrow* Initiative. The program's mission is to alleviate child hunger in Southwest Virginia by providing nutritious food that will also enhance children's learning abilities in the class room.

WHY IT'S NEEDED

National studies have shown that food deprived children are more likely to become sick, have a decreased attention span and lack of enthusiasm to learn because they are concentrating on hunger more than learning.

"Nearly 1 in every 4 children in America are at risk of hunger," said Travis Staton, Chief Executive Officer, United Way of Russell and Washington Counties. "With food being an essential building block of a child's ability to learn in school, we anticipate improved reading skills, better behavior, and increased attendance among students through the launch of this new program.

Currently, 65% of America's teachers report regularly seeing children who come to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home and 2/3 of teachers say most of their students rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition according to the Share Our Strength Non-Profit Organization.

"Hunger impairs our children's health, impedes their ability to learn and perform academically while predisposing emotional and behavioral difficulties," said Staton. "Children who struggle with hunger are sick more often, recover more slowly, and are more likely to be hospitalized. By providing the essential nutrition, children are more likely to concentrate and perform well in school."

HOW IT WORKS

As students return to school in Russell and Washington County this week principals, teachers and guidance counselors will begin selecting children with parental permission to enroll children into the program. Every Friday, beginning in October, 20 students from 17 participating schools, a total of 340 students, will start to discreetly receive food before school dismisses throughout the remainder of the 2011 – 2012 school year.

"Last school year we began a pilot program in Glade Spring Middle School and today we're very excited to have the opportunity to offer a broad scale backpack program to schools in both counties to aid in the well being of our students," said Fred Parker, United Way Board Chairman. "In today's economy this backpack program is essential to ensure that no child goes without the necessary nutrition to flourish and thrive in life."

Over the past few months United Way has worked with Food City's Corporate Registered Dietitian to select a variety of healthier food options to improve the quality of nutrients students receive throughout the weekend.

"Food City is committed to the communities we serve and there's no better investment we can make than in our youth," said Steven C. Smith, Food City President and CEO. "We're extremely excited to have the opportunity to work with United Way and our area schools to provide the basic necessities for our students to help ensure they receive the best possible education."

The first month's menu United Way has chosen includes oatmeal, cereal bars, wheat crackers, peanut butter, mandarin oranges, tuna, and raisins providing students with three meals to last through the weekend. The organization also intends to rotate menus each month so students will be introduced to a variety of healthy foods.

WAYS TO HELP

United Way officials stated their goal is to make this an ongoing, sustainable program, and in order to do so they will need ongoing support from the community by way of monetary donations and volunteer services. Program costs are estimated to be more than \$65,000 annually to the United Way of Russell and Washington Counties for the 340 students that will participate in this year's program. Those wishing to support the program and can text the word BACKPACK to 27722 in order to make a \$10 dollar contribution. Companies and organizations wishing to sponsor a school can contact the United Way at 276-628-2160, P.O. Box 644, Abingdon, VA 24212 or visit the organizations website at rwcunitedway.org to make an online contribution. United Way has confirmed that one-hundred percent of the donations made to this program will go to serve the students of Russell and Washington Community with no administrative fees withheld.

PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS INCLUDE:

RUSSELL COUNTY, VA – Belfast Elementary, Castlewood Elementary, Cleveland Elementary, Cooper Creek Elementary, Elk Garden Elementary, Givens Elementary, Honaker Elementary, Lebanon Elementary, Lebanon Primary, Lebanon Middle School, and Swords Creek Elementary.

WASHINGTON COUNTY, VA – Greendale Elementary, Highpoint Elementary, Meadowview Elementary, Rhea Valley Elementary, Watauga Elementary, and Valley Institute Elementary.

United Way is a volunteer organization that provides support and visibility through tools, partners, advocacy, and other resources that enables individuals to improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of their communities. Currently, the United Way of Russell and Washington Counties allocates resources to 42 partner agencies that address the most pressing human service needs in Russell and Washington County Virginia. Those wishing to learn more about United Way efforts to make a lasting impact on the needs of our community are encouraged to visit the organizations website at WWW.RWCUNITEDWAY.ORG.

Attached photo information:

Photo 01- Mike Puckett, Russell County Superintendent

Photo 02- Jim Sullivan, Washington County Superintendent

Photo 03- (Left to Right) Delegate Joe Johnson, Mike Puckett-Russell County Superintendent, Jim Sullivan-Washington County Superintendent, Fred Parker-UWRWC Board President, Israel O'Quinn-Food City-Director of Government and Community Affairs, Travis Staton-UWRWC CEO